DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 368 JC 030 359

TITLE	Revitalizing Rural Communities: Lessons from the Rural Community College Initiative.
INSTITUTION	MDC, Inc., Chapel Hill, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Ford Foundation, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	29p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Community Colleges; *Community Development; Community Education ; Economic Change; *Economic Development; Economic Impact; Economic Progress; *Rural Development; *Rural Education; Rural Environment; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Rural Community College Initiative

ABSTRACT

MDC, Inc. is a private nonprofit whose mission is to expand opportunities, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities in the South. The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) is a national project that supports community colleges in distressed rural areas in moving their people and communities toward prosperity. MDC and the Ford Foundation both worked to help RCCI move toward attainment of its goals. Nine demonstration community and tribal colleges joined the RCCI project in 1994, and 15 additional colleges joined RCCI in 1997. Each received implementation grants of $75,000 for the first 2 years, and smaller grants for 2 additional years. The colleges were able to leverage substantial support from foundations as well as state and federal government. RCCI community teams worked on small business development, workforce training, improving access to education, forging connections between the college and K-12 schools, developing distance education, improving developmental studies and academic support, and reaching out to draw more disadvantaged and minority students to the college. RCCI focused on developing solutions from within, as well as keeping development strategies local. The document includes an examination of barriers to implementation of RCCI, and a summary of how to move from vision to action. (Contains 10 references.) (NB)

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REVITALIZING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Lessons from the Rural Community College Initiative

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RCCI

REVITALIZING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Lessons from the Rural Community College Initiative

A National Demonstration
Funded by The Ford Foundation
Designed and Managed by MDC Inc.

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The Rural Community College Initiative

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) is a national project that supports community colleges in distressed rural areas in moving their people and communities toward prosperity. The RCCI's dual goals are increasing access to education and developing regional economies — both equipping people for productive, rewarding work and increasing the region's capacity to provide that work. These goals are achieved through a team-based, long-term strategic planning and implementation process; leadership development; skills development; peer learning and networking; and exposure to innovative and effective strategies for educational access and economic development.

RCCI began in 1994, when The Ford Foundation invited nine community and tribal colleges to engage in this unique approach to community development. In 1997, a second round of 15 colleges joined RCCI. The demonstration phase of the Initiative lasted from 1994 through 2001 and is the subject of this report. The demonstration was a partnership among the 24 participating community colleges; The Ford Foundation; the American Association of Community Colleges; and MDC Inc., a nonprofit organization that conducts research and manages demonstration projects in economic and workforce development. In 2002, RCCI began a new phase, directed by the Southern Rural Development Center and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

MDC Inc.

The mission of MDC is to advance the South through strategies that expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities. The organization furthers its mission by analyzing economic, workforce, and demographic trends to identify challenges that impede progress for the region and its people. To address those challenges, MDC works from multiple angles, including: developing responsive public policies; demonstrating effective programs; building institutional and community capacity for progress; and informing the public dialogue on development issues.

Established in 1967 to help North Carolina make the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy and from a segregated to an integrated workforce, MDC has spent the last 36 years publishing research and developing policies and programs to strengthen the workforce, foster economic development, and remove the barriers between people and jobs. MDC now works to facilitate the South's transition to a high-performing, multiracial society where economic, workforce, and community development work for all people and communities.

MDC is a private, nonprofit supported with grants and contracts from foundations; federal, state, and local governments; and the private sector.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, we extend our deepest appreciation to the teams and community members of the 24 sites that participated in the Rural Community College Initiative demonstration:

Alabama Southern Community College
Monroeville, AL

Blackfeet Community College
Browning, MT

Coahoma Community College
Clarksdale, MS

Danville Community College
Danville, VA

Fort Belknap College
Harlem, MT

Fort Peck Community College
Poplar, MT

Hazard Community College
Hazard, KY

Laredo Community College
Laredo, TX

Meridian Community College
Meridian, MS

Mountain Empire Community College
Big Stone Gap, VA

New Mexico State University at Carlsbad
Carlsbad, NM

Northern New Mexico Community College
Espanola, NM

Phillips Community College
Helena, AR

Prestonsburg Community College
Prestonsburg, KY

Salish Kootenai College
Pablo, MT

Sinte Gleska University
Rosebud, SD

Sitting Bull College
Fort Yates, SD

Somerset Community College
Somerset, KY

Southeast Community College
Cumberland, KY

Southeastern Community College
Whiteville, NC

Southwest Texas Junior College
Uvalde, TX

Technical College of the Lowcountry
Beaufort, SC

University of New Mexico at Gallup
Gallup, NM

Wallace Community College Selma
Selma, AL

The members of these teams invited us into their communities, shared their triumphs and frustrations with us, embraced us with their culture, and taught us much about perseverance of the spirit.

We also are grateful for our other partners in this Initiative: The Ford Foundation and its staff, particularly Susan Berresford, Queen Booker, Betsy Campbell, Cyrus Driver, Mil Duncan, and Steve Zwerling; the American Association of Community Colleges assessment team, led by Lynn Barnett and Ron Eller; the American Council on Education assessment team (1995-96), led by Hector Garza; and Video Dialog Inc., led by Steve Channing.

It has been an honor working with all of you.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story of community renewal.

From 1994 through 2001, 24 sites across America tested a new concept in rural development. The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) demonstration supported college/community teams in economically distressed areas as they worked to move their people and communities toward prosperity. RCCI's twin goals were equipping people for productive, rewarding work and increasing the region's capacity to provide that work through sustainable economic development.

RCCI began in 1994, when The Ford Foundation invited nine community and tribal colleges to engage in this unique approach to community development. In 1997, a second round of 15 colleges joined RCCI. The demonstration phase of the Initiative was a partnership among the 24 participating community colleges, The Ford Foundation, and the American Association of Community Colleges, with management and technical assistance provided by MDC Inc., a nonprofit organization that focuses on expanding opportunity, reducing poverty, and building inclusive communities.

The roots of RCCI go back long before 1994 at MDC and The Ford Foundation. As early as 1989, the organizations were brainstorming new approaches to rural development together. Staff at MDC and the Foundation brought similar values and beliefs about development to these conversations, which shaped the Initiative's focus and goals. MDC, as the managing partner of RCCI, developed the planning and community engagement process that the 24 sites would use in their work. That process reflected MDC's principles for community change, which had evolved over a decade of rural development work:

- When the goal is significant reform, change must occur at multiple levels:
  - — Individual;
  - — Interpersonal;
  - — Organizational;
  - — Community; and
  - — Systems and policy.
- People-in-relationship, not individual crusaders, are the lifeblood of sustainable change.
- Communities, institutions, and their citizens are best defined by their assets, strengths, and creative imagination, not their deficiencies and shortcomings.
- Change is a verb, not a noun. It cannot be delivered overnight.[1]

In much of rural America, education levels are low. Many young people drop out of school; others leave home after high school or college for lack of job opportunities. Communities often struggle to combat the sense of powerlessness that comes from absentee ownership of land and resources, a one-industry economy, or high dependence on government programs and transfer payments. And many places are divided by conflicts between racial or ethnic groups, between rich and poor, or between natives and newcomers.

MDC put together a framework for RCCI that allowed the flexibility necessary to address local problems and utilize local assets. This framework reflected our view of:

- **what needed to be worked on** — developing people's education and skills, expanding opportunities to earn a livelihood, and building the community's capacity to solve problems;
- **who needed to be doing the work** — an inclusive team that represented the community's diversity; and
- **how the work needed to be done** — values-driven visioning; data-based strategic planning and implementation; leadership development; peer learning and networking; and exposure to innovative and effective strategies.

The "what" of the work — the goals of increasing access to education while developing the regional economy — reflected MDC's view that rural revitalization requires a comprehensive approach. Communities must understand the trends that present opportunities and

[1] See *Building Community by Design*, MDC Inc., 2002.

Summary of the RCCI Process

Each RCCI site had a team led by the college and including community members representing partner organizations, local government, local businesses, and citizens. The team created a vision for the community's future and then developed a strategic plan to achieve that vision based on data and self-assessment. The team spearheaded community efforts to implement the plan, tracked progress, and adapted strategies as changing circumstances necessitated.

Throughout the Initiative, leadership institutes and other activities gave team members opportunities to increase their knowledge, skills, and commitment. They deepened their understanding of economic development and educational access; learned about relevant strategies; visited successful programs; attended workshops on a variety of subjects from working with public schools to fundraising to organizing an economic summit. They shared their strategies, challenges, and triumphs at conferences and participated in a national network of practitioners committed to similar goals. Each site had a "coach," who helped the team remain true to its values and connected the team to ideas and people, including a pool of technical advisors.

threats to their progress. To build prosperity, economically distressed communities must address both the demand and supply sides of the workforce equation. If a community with a weak economy focuses just on developing its workforce, it only opens wider the door to out-migration. But if it ignores workforce education and concentrates only on attracting new businesses and industry, it is unlikely to achieve higher wages or significant improvements in economic opportunity.

The "who" of the work — a local team — reflected MDC's understanding that community renewal requires a serious, long-term commitment. Because distressed rural communities face unique challenges and have unique assets, RCCI emphasized building the capacity of a community leadership team to understand and tackle local problems.

The "how" of the work — the process — revolved around a set of core values emphasizing equity, community assets, and high expectations. It respected local culture, encouraged local solutions to local problems, and fostered a safe space for residents to begin a dialogue to overcome long-standing divisions and misconceptions. It offered community leaders access to model programs and technical assistance providers.

Community colleges were tapped to lead RCCI's community development work because of their capacity and mandate to be involved in both place-based economic development and people-based education and training strategies. As "common ground" institutions, respected by the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, community colleges can be a safe, neutral meeting place for forging collaborative approaches to community development. More than most organizations, they are highly regarded by people of all social classes and they have the stature, stability, and flexibility to provide leadership for regional development. In many rural communities, community colleges are the only institutions with a broad community-service mission and a stable stream of public funding.

RCCI's focus on developing solutions from within yielded a rich variety of strategies among the 24 sites, which included the nation's most impoverished rural areas — from the deep South to Appalachia, the Southwestern deserts, and Indian reservations of the Northern Plains. Sites entered RCCI with varying levels of readiness and diverse community challenges. Each site articulated its own vision and designed appropriate projects to achieve it. Some sites focused their work internally on the college, strengthening the institution and expanding its programs and services, while others focused externally on goals for community change. As the managing partner, MDC endeavored to maintain a learning environment for the Initiative that encouraged risk-taking and celebrated innovation regardless of what path each site chose.

Many lessons have emerged from the complex work that teams and communities undertook in the Rural Community College Initiative. As they developed and fine-tuned specific strategies, RCCI sites produced a wealth of experience about revitalizing rural communities, including lessons about:

- Locally driven development;
- Catalyzing change;
- Equity and power;
- Increasing community capacity; and
- Getting to innovation.

While the change efforts in RCCI sites were led by college/community teams, the majority of the lessons learned can inform any community-change effort in rural America.

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LOCALLY DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT

While it may seem simplistic, it's true: "When you've seen one rural community — you've seen one rural community." Because every community has its own particular context, challenges, and assets, a cookie-cutter approach to development — applying a standard set of solutions everywhere — does not work in rural America. Consequently, RCCI helped each community develop a clear picture of its situation and generate appropriate, place-based strategies for improving its prospects.

As much as communities might wish for simple "silver bullet" solutions to their challenges, there is no such thing. The work of inventing and implementing place-based solutions is not easy, but in our experience it is the only effective, sustainable approach to rural renewal. Furthermore, as economic and demographic shifts occur faster and faster across the country, the ability to identify opportunities, solve problems, and adapt to change becomes ever more important for community prosperity.

For revitalization efforts to be successful, leaders must have a deep understanding of their community.

Understanding the context of one's community — its history and current situation in relation to regional, state, and global forces — is essential for success in community development. Important context-related factors include:

Assets

Different communities have different resources upon which to build economic vitality, and local leaders must comprehend their community's assets as a first step toward building prosperity. It is worth looking beyond the assets that are obvious or readily accessible. Sometimes, creative approaches can even convert perceived problems into assets. For example, few in Appalachia would identify abandoned coal mines as community assets, but Southeast Community College's RCCI team in Cumberland, KY, tapped cold water runoff from an abandoned mine to provide a constant supply of 54 degree-cooled water for a demonstration fish farm.

Some potential assets are controversial and require sensitive deployment as the basis for an economic development initiative. For instance, the Sitting Bull College team on the Standing Rock Reservation in the Dakotas believed the tribe's history and culture could generate tourism opportunities connected with the multiyear Lewis and Clark Centennial celebration. Some tribal members were concerned about the potentially negative impact of increased tourism. The RCCI team responded by designing a tour that would honor

the Hunk Papa Sioux history and culture, while steering visitors to parts of the reservation that the tribe was willing to open to tourism and development.

Economy

Though all RCCI communities faced some degree of economic distress, their situations varied widely and their leaders had to respond in kind. Some places like Pablo, MT, had high poverty among native populations juxtaposed with a booming tourism industry. Salish Kootenai College responded by creating a tribal business assistance center to help more Indians participate in the region's prosperity. In its first five years, the center served 700 clients, who started more than 150 businesses and expanded another 200 enterprises.

Other RCCI sites had dwindling populations and declining economies based on low-skill manufacturing or extractive industries. To overcome huge job losses from closed textile mills, Alabama Southern Community College strengthened its partnerships with the region's chemical, paper, and forestry industries to upgrade technical training and provide scholarships and internships to college students.

The communities that had the most difficulty conceiving strategies for economic development were those that were geographically isolated with sparse populations and poor infrastructure, including Indian reservations in Montana and the Dakotas. Despite such challenges, even the most economically distressed communities in RCCI made visible progress in enlivening the economic prospects of their people. Sitting Bull College developed its construction trades curriculum and started its own construction company to provide transitional employment for graduates and much-needed services to the community. Fort Belknap College created a small business development center that enabled entrepreneurism and increased business ownership and employment. Blackfeet Community College developed an Indian Chamber of Commerce that strengthened business networking and development.

Building and sustaining a healthy economy requires attention to multiple components. Landing a new factory may provide some good-paying jobs, but seldom will it single-handedly revive the economic base of a hard-pressed community. Building a solid foundation for economic development is essential for creating long-term economic opportunity. That foundation includes infrastructure, civic capacity and leadership, social supports, access to education and skills training, support for business development, and cultural and environmental stewardship.[2]

Power and equity

The more divided a community is along lines of class and race, the more difficult it is to start and sustain a collaborative, comprehensive development effort. In MDC's experience, progress that benefits all people is unlikely when decision-making and assets are controlled by just a few. Communities seeking equitable, sustainable progress must eventually address their race and class divides. Leaders must summon the courage to examine who holds power in their community, who is left out, and the implications of maintaining or challenging the status quo. As the demonstration unfolded, it became clear that leaders must be aware of power relationships in their communities and be prepared to address inequities to create an environment where change is sustainable.

[2] See *Building Blocks of Community Development*, MDC Inc., 2001.

Research and planning take time, but they are essential to address the root causes of a community's challenges.

Community leaders tend to be people who favor action over contemplation. When MDC introduced a college/community strategic planning process as the first step of RCCI, some teams said, "We've already planned to death. It's time to *do* something." But they came to recognize that a process for gaining and applying knowledge — not only before the work begins, but over the long haul — is fundamental to the success of rural community development efforts.

Powerful development requires thoughtful planning, research, and creative invention. For the RCCI demonstration, MDC adapted our strategic planning process, *Moving from Vision to Action*, to focus on rural development and education issues. In the first step of the planning process, the team gathers and analyzes data to reach consensus on the current state of education and the economy in their community and to determine priorities for change. Later when the team is considering specific actions, *Moving from Vision to Action* provides a template for researching each potential strategy to better understand what it entails and whether it is the best way for the team to achieve its goals. (See Figure 1, "A Summary of Moving from Vision to Action.")

MISTAKES to avoid...

Developing strategies doesn't necessarily mean creating new programs. Analyze the problems you want to tackle and consider what kind of response will have the most leverage. If the root of the problem is an information gap, a public information campaign may be the best response. If the problem has its root in dysfunctional public policy, you may need to mobilize support to change the policy.

Like many rural communities, most RCCI sites were isolated from fresh ideas and new thinking in rural development. To compensate, the RCCI process concentrated on connecting our sites to smart people and wise strategies for community renewal from around the country. The program encouraged sites to cultivate the habit of active curiosity, searching out peers who had made headway on similar challenges, even if they happened to be in unlikely places: an educational access program in Newark, NJ; an urban development program in Chattanooga, TN; and a business development program on an American Indian reservation in Mississippi proved to be rich sources of inspiration for participants. In addition to encouraging communities to cast a wide net for fresh ideas, the RCCI warned sites against wholesale replication, instead encouraging sites to tailor strategies to their local situation.

During the planning process, teams needed to ascertain which challenges they could address on their own and which might necessitate outside help. The RCCI demonstration sites had access both to coaches and technical experts. MDC also organized annual gatherings that contributed to team learning by tapping the expertise of the 24 sites and national resource people. This structure and process for gaining and applying knowledge helped teams better understand their challenges and their options, making their road to change more direct than it would have been otherwise.

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The complex challenges in distressed rural communities require an equally complex and comprehensive response.

At the start of RCCI, teams set their sights on initiating successful projects. But ultimately, many teams recognized that significant change would require more than a discrete project or even a dozen discrete projects. To get closer to the roots of community problems, some teams began organizing their communities to bring about deeper change.

At many sites, the *Moving from Vision to Action* strategic planning process functioned as a community-organizing vehicle. By involving more than just the "usual suspects" in the dialogue about the region's future, teams used the process to rally the broader community around a common vision. In many RCCI communities, this approach contrasted sharply with traditional practice, in which a small nucleus of powerful people directed — or stifled — all efforts at change.

Figure 1 **A Summary of Moving from Vision to Action**

STEP	PURPOSE	KEY QUESTION
1. Collect and Analyze Data	Understand the current situation.	Where are our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats?
2. Describe the Current Situation	Prioritize key issues/ challenges.	What strengths and opportunities should we build on? What weaknesses and threats must we overcome?
3. Create a Vision	Depict the ideal future.	What should be the results of our efforts?
4. Set Goals	Define the ideal future situation.	What specific outcomes do we want to achieve?
5. Develop Strategies	Determine programmatic actions that will produce the desired future.	What approach will we take to reach those outcomes?
6. Analyze Stakeholders' Influence	Determine who needs to be involved.	What political/institutional factors should we consider?
7. Plan for Funding and Sustainability	Set out ideas for how to ensure long-term sustainability.	How will we pay for our strategies — short-term and long-term?
8. Plan for Action	Define implementation responsibilities.	Who will do what, when?
9. Plan an Evaluation	Define benchmarks to measure progress and an approach to measurement.	How will we know when we have achieved our goals?

Fort Peck Community College, a tribal college in Montana, turned to the community elders, most of whom were women, for advice on directions to take with RCCI. The elders' concerns about dysfunctions in family units caused the college to see more clearly the link between the success of families, individual students, and ultimately the economic success of the reservation. The college changed its philosophy, placing new emphasis on serving families. It sponsored or helped initiate a rich array of family-centered programs on the reservation, including: native language preschools; family literacy programs; and a wellness center with health screening services, nutritional counseling, and fitness programs.

A key to success in RCCI communities was visionary leadership, which came from any of several quarters within the team — the college president, the team leader, or a team member. Effective leaders embraced the imperative for change and transformation, had credibility in the larger community, were personally committed and willing to take risks, and were willing and able to invest their time. This type of leadership helped convince others that change was possible, and it motivated people to work together over the long haul.

The MathFirst Initiative in Meridian, MS, cast a wide net to include over 150 community members on an expanded RCCI team. To build a diverse team, leaders at the college recruited team members with many different points of view, connections, and areas of knowledge. This mix helped team members gain awareness and understanding of conflicting views in the community. Over time, the team built unity around common values and led ambitious efforts to improve education in Meridian for people of all ages, from preschool through adult.

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CATALYZING CHANGE

Communities, institutions, systems, and people are naturally resistant to change. And in the face of overwhelming and entrenched problems such as an eroding economy or lagging education rates, natural resistance often mingles with resignation to make change seem impossible. Stuck communities need a catalyst — a motivating force that mobilizes people to hope and action. Many RCCI teams were able to play that role.

Catalyzing community-wide change requires time, effort, and navigation around numerous obstacles. Many factors can stall a team during planning and implementation. Members' interest may wane, and other priorities may compete for their time. Viewpoints on what to do and how to proceed can diverge and cause friction within the leadership team. The RCCI experience offers a number of lessons for increasing the chance of turning the catalyst's spark into a flame of change.

Communities make more progress when their leaders are pulling in the same direction.

To move a community forward, it is important to build "alignment" — to develop a shared understanding of the current situation and a shared vision for the future across a broad spectrum of community leaders. Communities where members pull in the same direction are more likely to see progress than communities where organizations and factions work at competing priorities. It is essential to include diverse viewpoints in a community-change effort, but the more stakeholders involved, the harder it can be to achieve alignment — especially when various interests fail to share common visions and assumptions about the future.

This is where identifying shared values has great power. While people may disagree on how best to educate our children, they will agree that all children deserve a good education. The technique used by professional mediators — focusing on *why* people want something to happen instead of specifically *what* they want to happen — can open up opportunities for alignment and enable communities to build consensus on difficult issues. MDC's *Moving from Vision to Action* process urges teams to discuss their shared values before developing a vision of the future, to help them stay focused on what really matters to their community and what they most want for their families and neighbors. When RCCI teams grounded their work in commonly held values, they had a sustaining base to return to when setbacks occurred or disagreements popped up. Tribal colleges, whose core missions are deeply rooted in their tribes' values, often excelled at this step of the planning process.

To agree on values, vision, and strategies for action, team members need a common understanding of terms. Reaching agreement on the meaning of concepts can

be an important early step for a team, especially if members represent different cultures. For example, the term "economic development" was problematic in some RCCI Indian communities in part because it implied individual gain, which was at odds with traditional values of generosity and shared wealth. RCCI coaches helped tribal college teams define economic development in ways that had positive meaning in their culture. Sinte Gleska University's team found it helpful to discuss the concepts of prosperity and wealth in their native language to develop a shared vision for individual and collective opportunity.

Self-understanding is essential for effective leaders, and interpersonal relationships are essential for community change.

Community problem-solving requires a twin focus on content ("How do we want things to be different in the future? What do we want to be? What program strategies will lead us to our vision?") and process ("How should we organize our work? How can we sustain our momentum? Who is missing from our deliberations?"). Part of MDC's work in RCCI involved helping team members become more effective problem-solvers for their institutions and communities by mastering new content and collaborative process.

MISTAKES to avoid...

Don't skip the important work of relationship-building among team members. Living in the same town for 20 years and knowing each other's names doesn't mean people *know* each other. Trust and commitment must be cultivated to enable the team to tackle complex challenges and stick together over the long haul.

Ronald Heifetz defines two different kinds of leadership challenges. "Technical challenges" call for leaders to apply their current knowledge, skills, and tools to address routine or familiar obstacles. "Adaptive challenges" require leaders to help others clarify their values and recalibrate their expectations, attitudes, and behaviors to succeed against unconventional problems. Adaptive leadership is needed to tackle unprecedented or unfamiliar challenges, and it requires leaders who have knowledge and competencies at five levels:

1. ***Individual:*** People must recognize that as individuals, they, too, are part of the system to be changed. To become effective leaders, they must seek greater self-understanding and be open to personal change.
2. ***Interpersonal:*** New relationships must be built across old fault lines, and people must learn to work together in a consensus-based process.
3. ***Organizational:*** Community-change work must be grounded in an organizational home. That may mean tapping into an existing organization's agenda or creating a new organization to do the work. Local leaders may need new skills and resources to build and sustain strong local organizations.
4. ***Community:*** Community change is complex, and many skills — from partnering to public relations — are required to conceive and implement new ideas.
5. ***Systemic/policy:*** Substantive community change must go beyond new programs or projects. It often requires changing public and private systems that determine the direction of and support for community development efforts.

While MDC emphasized levels two through four in the RCCI demonstration, we have come to understand that the individual level and the systemic/policy level are equally important in community-change initiatives.

Local change agents need to be clear about their personal values and perspectives, because we all carry views that affect the work we attempt. It is critical for leaders to examine their assumptions about the community, its people, and how change occurs. This inner work, coupled with interpersonal (or "relational") work, is what drives an effective community-change process. Too often, however, people overlook reflection and relationship-building in their haste to get to action.

Leaders must also be aware of the systems and public policies that affect their work, as they can mean the difference in sustaining local efforts long term. This

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fifth level of change can also create conditions to support changes on a larger scale, for example, through state or federal policies. Some RCCI sites were able to make systemic or policy changes within their colleges; others tackled the more difficult challenge of changing external policies.

Meridian's MathFirst coalition, for example, brought about policy changes in the public schools. Because of their joint participation on the MathFirst/RCCI team, officials from the city and county school districts began sharing data with each other, RCCI team members, and the public. MathFirst's focus on the importance of early childhood learning led to the allocation of some Title I dollars to preschool programs operated outside the school system. And as a result of new attitudes toward working in partnership with the community, the Meridian schools began allowing parents to help select principals.

Keep hope alive.

Richard Bach once wrote, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours." Communities that believe they cannot change things for the better probably can't, because people will only act within their self-imposed limitations. Unfortunately, decades of limited opportunities and isolation have left many rural communities feeling that progress is impossible. They have lost hope for a better future.

RCCI helped invigorate hope for team members by showing that improvement is possible and providing moral support, motivation, and energy. The Initiative used a variety of strategies, including a peer-learning network, workshops and learning events, speakers from communities that had overcome similar challenges, and site visits to see revitalized communities or effective projects firsthand. For team members who doubted they could bring about progress or who had a limited vision of what was possible, RCCI provided a "conversion" experience, opening their minds and hearts to all their communities could be. Not atypical was a comment by a team member from a small coastal community in South Carolina who after spending several days in the bustling city of Laredo, TX, said, "I didn't think I was going to learn much from coming to Laredo, but I was wrong. There isn't 10 cents worth of difference between our community's problems and Laredo's."

Teams whose members truly believed their communities should and could change for the better stuck with the work over the long haul, through the inevitable ups and downs. These teams made progress faster than those with less committed members because the work had momentum and the teams had stable membership. For these teams, setbacks engendered greater resolve instead of resignation to failure. The RCCI team at Sitting Bull College, for example, endured enormous pressure and confrontation from factions on the reservation when the team took leadership in planning the allocation of millions of dollars in federal trust funds owed to the tribe. The resolve of the members of the core planning team eventually resulted in a plan that satisfied the majority of the tribe. But it would have been easy for the team to quit any number of times when they were challenged vigorously in public community meetings.

EQUITY AND POWER

Economic justice requires attention to equity. In many communities, economic and political power are closely held by just a few people. In some rural, economically distressed communities, the same families have held power for generations. Family name, skin color, street address, and whether you were born and raised locally can be the basis for opportunity or its denial. Whether the haves and have-nots are separated by race, class, or language, these divisions limit the prospects of the community itself.

Equitable progress is only possible when all elements of the community are represented in the planning and development effort. Yet a seat at the table is not enough — silent interests must be encouraged to have a voice and to participate fully in the work. A team can effect many improvements without challenging the local power structure, but in deeply divided communities it is unlikely significant change will occur without a degree of "rocking the boat."

RCCI was designed with core values of inclusion, equity, and excellence in part to address issues of social justice and power. RCCI teams were encouraged to set high expectations for the community and strive for excellent outcomes for all people. While RCCI put equity front and center in the design and implementation of the work, it did not attempt a full assault on race and class divisions. As a result, MDC learned valuable lessons from what we did as well as what we did not attempt. We continue to explore the most effective ways to address these thorny challenges.

To achieve equity in some communities, the power structure must change.

Attempting to make a community more inclusive and equitable, like attempting to change a person's world view, is extremely difficult, long-term, and potentially explosive work. For a public institution, it can be especially precarious.

RCCI teams used a variety of methods to change the makeup and behavior of the community power structure. They demonstrated that these methods — many of which are familiar to community organizers — could be effective in rural, distressed communities:

- **Organize the public to raise its voice and be heard by the political establishment.** In Carlsbad, NM, the RCCI team invited the entire community into its planning process, meeting with dozens of groups to find out what they thought needed to change. The team invited residents of all ages to participate

in "Community Day" — a people's economic summit — where they voted for priorities among 250-plus ideas for community improvements. Ten percent of Carlsbad's population participated, and the high level of engagement garnered the attention of the community's elected leaders and jostled conventional thinking about Carlsbad's economic destiny.

- **Build a widening circle of powerful allies.** Southeast Community College in Cumberland, KY, was deliberate in building a circle of allies who ultimately introduced progressive ideas into several local institutions. For example, one of the team's goals was to increase financial capital and support services for small businesses. A banker on the RCCI team used personal connections to educate other area bankers about the need for small business lending and innovative models for loan programs. The result was creation of a multibank loan fund for new and expanding small businesses. The team also organized a trip for high-ranking community officials to visit a successful economic development program in another state, an experience that opened their eyes to innovative approaches to development.
- **Get allies into positions of power through elections or appointment.** Coahoma (MS) Community College's team gained a sympathetic ally in the state capital when their team leader was elected to the state legislature. Several team members assisted his campaign, and they ended up with a staunch ally working on behalf of their community and advocating for state support for education and community development.
- **Create community leadership development programs to change the power structure over time.** Meridian Community College created Leadership Lauderdale, a yearlong leadership development program designed to bring fresh ideas and new voices to the community's leadership pool. The program nurtures potential leaders from groups that were underrepresented in leadership positions, including African Americans, young adults, and women. Participants study leadership development theories, learn how to lead collaborative strategic planning, analyze economic and social problems, and develop projects that give them firsthand experience with community change. In designing Leadership Lauderdale, local leaders adopted RCCI's philosophy regarding equity, high expectations, and building on community assets.
- **Seek out and provide moral and technical support to community leaders who are sympathetic to the team's goals.** This can enable those in power to take greater risks in advocating for community change. Danville (VA) Community College introduced a progressive economic development consultant (whom it had met through RCCI) to civic leaders, who then hired the consultant to guide the planning work of a nascent economic development council. The resulting plan was in line with Danville's RCCI goals and unlike anything the community's traditional economic developers had attempted before. It also enabled Danville and Pittsylvania County, VA, to successfully draw down significant investment for education and development from Virginia's tobacco settlement fund.
- **Focus on common interests.** In their assessment of the current situation, the RCCI team at the University of New Mexico-Gallup observed that their community had numerous organizations and government agencies with overlapping missions, competing for dwindling resources. The team spearheaded the formation of the McKinley Development Foundation to serve as the major fundraiser for economic development in the region. With Indian tribes, city and county government, school districts, and hospitals represented on its board, the Foundation soon secured a $300,000 grant from the Qwest Foundation to provide high-speed Internet services to the whole community. Another grant for distance learning and telemedicine enabled rural communities to access quality health care and education without having to travel long distances.

Working through a mainstream institution like a community college has pros and cons when it comes to challenging the status quo.

Community colleges are a good choice to lead rural development work for several reasons: in many rural areas, they are one of the few large institutions that exist; they are respected, relatively stable organizations with a predictable funding stream; and they are neutral ground where a wide spectrum of community members can feel comfortable, provided that the college makes an effort both to understand and represent the community's diversity. However, the college's relationship to the local power structure can either hinder or help the team's ability to bring about change in the community.

MISTAKES to avoid...

Don't think that just because a coordinating institution is well-respected, it is equipped to bridge the divides of race and class. While addressing these sensitive issues may be necessary to bring about significant change, it is a high-risk proposition that requires great skill. It might require collaborating with an organization that has more experience in this area or enlisting the aid of an outside expert.

Colleges and other mainstream institutions that are a part of the community power structure have credibility within that structure. They can legitimize a change effort and bring mainstream civic leaders to the table. For instance, the college president may be a member of the local economic development board; a mayor or local bank president may be willing to join a college/community team.

However, being part of the local establishment can also limit the ability of the college and the team to challenge the status quo. A step in the wrong direction may create political fallout, damaging the college's reputation and blocking further work by the team. Many community colleges are governed by local boards that represent vested local interests, and few institutions are willing to challenge the people who hold their purse strings.

For colleges or other institutions that lack connections to the community power structure, the first step to taking a leadership role in the public arena is establishing credibility. This takes time. The president, faculty, and staff may need to become more active in civic affairs and the college may need to invite the community to be involved in decisions about the college — what is taught and how, and when and where services are offered. Before such an institution can take on a broader role in community change, it must educate the established leaders about its work, demonstrate the value it can add to community problem-solving, engage allies and supporters. In this way, it can begin to build the trusting relationships and credibility that will allow it to grow into a community leadership role.

When Southwest Texas Junior College joined RCCI, it was primarily an academic institution where students completed the first two years of a four-year college degree. It did not view itself, and was not viewed by others, as an active player in regional economic development. Through RCCI and the influence of team members representing business, government, and nonprofit organizations, the college became more engaged with the community. The college president encouraged faculty and staff to participate in civic organizations, and he joined several community boards. Gradually, the college's capacity and image changed, and eventually it took a leadership role in regional economic development, helping its region win federal designation first as an Enterprise Community and then an Empowerment Zone.

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Conversations about race and class are tough to get started, but they aren't impossible.

It is impossible to address race and class divides without talking about them. And for many people, participating in such a conversation is extremely uncomfortable. People with race or class privilege may fear being branded racist or elitist regardless of the beliefs they hold and how they behave. Minority and low-income people may fear sharing their experiences and opinions will lead to retribution or reprisals.

Using data to take an objective look at the community allows people to enter the conversation without immediately raising their defenses. The RCCI's community-visioning process began by creating a data-based picture of the community's current situation. The analysis focused the conversation on community challenges, not individuals' challenges, but it helped to uncover practices and beliefs that were closing off opportunities to segments of the population. This disciplined process of analysis and team discussion helped team members see their community from new perspectives.

Another approach RCCI took was to expose team members to other cultures and communities through learning institutes and site visits. Learning about the plight of poor people in other communities, combined with RCCI's values of equity, inclusion, and excellence, provided RCCI participants with a broader and deeper understanding of economic and social justice.

MISTAKES to avoid...

A group leader should never spring a surprise conversation about prejudice on the team. Even if you think the group has the trusting relationships necessary to have such a conversation, advance notice is essential. People need time to prepare themselves for participating openly and honestly; otherwise they can feel ambushed and threatened.

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INCREASING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

To be successful at economic and community development, a community needs people committed to work for the community's well-being. They must have the skills and resources for identifying and solving problems and acting on new opportunities. The RCCI was designed to build this type of community capacity by developing a leadership team and building institutional relationships between the college and other allies that could work for community change over the long term.

While the demonstration focused on inventing and implementing effective education and development strategies, the RCCI encouraged sites to practice and master skills that will help them address nearly any future challenge. Reflective learning, leadership development, and collaborative ways of working each contributed to the growth of that capacity.

Teams need to take time to reflect on their work.

When a community leadership team functions as a "learning community" — a group of people who consciously seek out new ideas and regularly push themselves to learn from their mistakes — the result is increased "knowledge capital" for community development. The RCCI had two levels of learning communities: individual teams, and the greater collective of participants from across the country.

At the team level, RCCI coaches periodically facilitated meetings to help teams reflect on progress toward their goals and obstacles impeding their progress. They also discussed issues of team dynamics — how well is the team functioning; how can its internal workings be improved? When this reflection and reevaluation was effective, it improved teams' understanding of their work and how to do it better, and led to greater outcomes.

Team members cited learning and reflection opportunities with their peers from other communities as one of the most valued aspects of the Initiative. Cross-cultural learning opportunities were particularly valuable, as geographic and cultural diversity allowed teams to gain insight on their communities by seeing them through a different lens. In structured dialogues, teams discussed their goals, successes, and challenges with each other and got feedback and advice from their peers. This often provided fresh perspectives on old problems and new ideas about approaches to try.

The pool of potential leaders in every community is wider and deeper than it seems.

RCCI's practice of using diverse teams to plan, implement, and oversee new strategies created opportunities for many natural leaders to emerge at the college and in the community. New leaders were groomed, in part, by having someone other than the college president serve as team leader. Some teams created working committees that expanded opportunities for college and community representatives to play leadership roles. Other sites used study tours and community forums to draw in more grassroots and community members to help set goals and make planning decisions.

Mountain Empire Community College, for example, formed a small core planning and implementation team, but over time realized their work would be futile unless they could raise awareness among a broad spectrum of citizens about the economic problems and choices facing the region. They convened an "economic summit" to showcase success stories from other communities that had overcome economic decline and to enlist more citizens in active planning for community revitalization. The college also sent over 60 citizens to Tupelo, MS, to learn how that community had gone from being one of the poorest in its state to one of the most prosperous. Several journalists used their newspaper columns to raise community awareness of lessons learned on the study tour, and many citizens found ways to incorporate lessons in their own work.

Other RCCI sites created formal leadership development programs to expand the community's leadership base or counteract an entrenched leadership elite that was upholding the status quo. RCCI leadership programs (such as Meridian's Leadership Lauderdale described above) focused on identifying potential leaders who reflected the community's diversity, informing them about issues important to the community, building relationships among the new leaders, and providing them with the skills necessary to pursue community-change work.

Collaborating takes time and effort, but the return on investment is worth it.

RCCI created diverse college/community teams because the very nature of community development calls for broad community involvement. Collaboration among community organizations, public agencies, and the private sector is essential to overcome the issues that are responsible for economic distress. In communities with limited history of collaboration, or where RCCI team members had little experience working outside a narrow network, it took longer to lay the groundwork for development activities. For example, during its first three years, the RCCI team at Coahoma Community College in Clarksdale, MS, was comprised only of college representatives. With limited experience working collaboratively across department lines, Coahoma's faculty and staff needed time to strengthen college operations and hone partnering skills within their institution before attempting to work with the larger community on college and community improvement.

As with personal relationships, building a trusting relationship among organizations takes time and effort. Ironically, the organizations that would benefit most from new partnerships often have fewest resources to spare to develop those partnerships. However, even meager resources, when expended to identify and develop strategic partnerships, can yield

MISTAKES to avoid...

If your goal is community renewal, don't create a leadership team that represents only one institution, and don't have just one person driving the work. Those routes will never yield broad-enough involvement to achieve community-wide renewal.

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a significant payoff. Given the time and effort it takes to develop a collaborative partnership, it is in every partner's interest that the relationship be long term to maximize the return on investments. A partner who does not benefit from the collaboration has little reason to participate over the long term.

In RCCI, collaboration with other institutions and organizations brought additional resources to the table. Often it extended the college's reach into the community, including outreach to underserved populations. Over time, RCCI's collaborative nature nurtured civic networks and increased overall civic capacity.

GETTING TO INNOVATION

Overcoming entrenched problems in a community requires developing a culture of innovation. Old responses and behaviors will keep a community stuck with old problems. To move beyond the comfort zone of familiar ideas, a community must involve new people in civic affairs and adopt a process to stimulate new ideas.

But "thinking outside the box" is easier said than done. People often need help generating new ideas. They may need to gain new knowledge; they must be willing to take risks and persevere, and they need support when things don't work out. They must critically examine things that appear to be working in the community, along with the things that clearly are not working.

Communities that adopt a "learning" attitude are able to weather the ups and downs of a community-change effort better.

Community development efforts take a long time to show results. As MDC's *Building Community by Design* guidebook says, "Change is a verb, not a noun. It cannot be delivered overnight." Some teams burn out or give up before they ever see the fruits of their labors.

In geographically and intellectually isolated rural communities, it is especially important to build in time for learning, to set the stage for generating new ideas. Leaders need to be willing to see their communities honestly, with fresh eyes. They may need to learn about development theory and practice. They must keep an open mind and learn from their own mistakes — to figure out what went wrong and how to avoid getting the same results the next time. RCCI provided a conceptual framework as a new perspective as well as opportunities for learning through annual convenings, coaching, and peer learning.

Southeast Community College (KY) is a prime example — they called their team a think tank, and they made sure learning was a priority. They took multiple site visit trips to learn about promising programs firsthand, and they always brought the largest group of team members possible to learning institutes. Their resulting programs are far more innovative than before RCCI. They've taken on nontraditional roles of developing and spinning off an aquaculture business, creating a small business financing fund, and convening a regional business financing alliance.

RCCI teams that sought out and absorbed new knowledge, built their capacity to create new strategies, and risked trying new strategies were the most successful in

MISTAKES to avoid...

Some people are more oriented toward process, while others focus on outcomes. Goal-oriented people may quit the team if the process takes too long to produce results. Including a mix of strategies designed to produce short-term as well as long-term results helps motivate everyone on the team. Relatively quick visible results also help garner community support for the longer-term work.

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bringing about change. They were researchers, innovators, and entrepreneurs, adapting new ideas from a variety of sources. They used setbacks as an opportunity to learn, regroup, modify their strategies, and move forward, increasing their own capacity and the effectiveness of their efforts.

Change requires taking risks, and taking risks requires support.

For most community leaders, addressing entrenched problems head-on is a high-risk proposition. Others, who have worked for years only to achieve incremental change, may favor more radical or risky strategies. RCCI gave some colleges the courage and incentive to step out into the unknown. It encouraged innovation and risk-taking by providing exposure to new ideas; flexible money; peer support; expert technical assistance; and permission to experiment, fail, and try again. Laredo Community College in Texas, for example, used the challenge and the support provided by RCCI to reach out to new populations and communities that were within its designated service area but outside its tax district. It developed programs for families living in impoverished, isolated colonias, a population that had virtually no prior association with the college. Ultimately, the college decided to build a new campus accessible to its outlying rural service area.

By starting the planning process with a critical, data-based self-assessment, a team often unearths new opportunities for development that otherwise might never have been considered. Hard facts can provide a solid foundation that enables a team to examine radical or risky ideas instead of dismissing them immediately. And in some cases, when seen in an objective light and considered with open minds, community challenges even become opportunities.

Even if it is good, it can be better.

It is important to look at things institutions and communities think they do well and examine them for soft spots. People don't get excited about reexamining the familiar — "It's old hat" — but it can provide opportunities for significant improvement. For example, although community colleges are "open door" institutions and enroll many low-income students, most could be more effective in reaching out to all segments of their community.

Several elements in RCCI motivated colleges to rethink how they could improve access to education. First was the Initiative's conceptual framework, which emphasized equity, inclusion, and excellence. Those values, combined with data analysis and rigorous self-examination through the *Moving from Vision to Action* process, called attention to populations that were not succeeding in college programs or not even enrolling. Experts and peers at RCCI institutes shared new approaches to access, while community members on the team often held their college accountable to its ambitious community service mission. In the planning stage of the demonstration, we had community members "speak truth" to the college about what it did and didn't do well. This critical feedback was sometimes hard for colleges to take in, but it helped the team learn to "read reality" honestly, and not just assume that the college was exempt from the need to change.

Once colleges identified their weaknesses, they were able to improve services for students with academic, personal, or financial challenges. The RCCI process

motivated several community colleges that already served a low-income, first-generation population and were "doing access well" to reach out to more severely disadvantaged, underserved people in their communities.

Danville Community College in rural Virginia, for example, discovered during its RCCI planning process that despite its excellent track record in enrolling local high school graduates, there were some low-income neighborhoods in its service area where the college was hardly known. With participation from residents in those neighborhoods, the college created outreach centers where residents could take some classes, have access to computers, and get acquainted with the college as a friendly institution.

Every community-change effort needs an organizing force, and rural community colleges are a good option.

Before people and institutions can act in concert to bring about change in their community, they first must be organized around a common vision and strategies. In a variety of cultures and circumstances, RCCI's college/community teams played that role, providing leadership to organize their communities. They led community planning efforts, injected enthusiasm and hope, and introduced new ideas about community development. Some teams spearheaded the creation of new institutions to fill organizing gaps in their communities, including community development corporations, Indian Chambers of Commerce, and community foundations.

Strong community organizations and organizing capacity are scarce in distressed rural areas. In many places, the community college is the only (or the best) option to lead a community development effort. Its permanent status in the community is a strength for leading a long-term community-change effort. Its mission, service area, and expertise in adult education and workforce training make a community college especially well suited to providing leadership in building a foundation for economic development. It can help the community understand its economic development opportunities and options and help create a new, shared vision for the community's future.

Some RCCI colleges first had to strengthen themselves and realign their vision and mission before they were ready to lead community-change efforts. Some were small institutions that struggled from year to year to meet their budgets and to fulfill their core educational mission. Nonetheless, the colleges that embraced the role of community organizer and assembled an effective college/community team showed the potential of rural community colleges to provide leadership for a broad community-change agenda.

EPILOGUE

Affirmation of RCCI's accomplishments

A team of education and social science researchers, coordinated by the American Association of Community Colleges, evaluated the demonstration phase of the Initiative. According to this independent assessment, RCCI sites showed that dedicated teams of local people can:

Significantly improve their communities' civic environments...

- RCCI teams strengthened the will for community change by convening community conversations on new topics and mobilizing regional leadership around a positive vision for the future.
- They raised their communities above disenfranchisement, dysfunction, and disentitlement by communicating and modeling a commitment to equity and excellence, demonstrating success, and articulating a new vision for the future.
- They built up their communities' civic infrastructure and problem-solving capacity, including human services, leadership development, and economic development infrastructures, which are sparse in many rural communities.

RCCI is about energizing distressed rural communities and the local colleges that serve them. It is about change and capacity. Through a structured process of guided intervention, 24 colleges and their communities learned how to change, how to see themselves differently, how to build new partnerships, how to adapt new ideas to local needs, and how to implement collaborative college/community projects.

— *Executive Summary of RCCI National Assessment Report*, AACC, 2001

Provide new ideas and energy to spawn community change...

- RCCI teams provided their communities with an expanded vision of educational access and economic development, new ideas about roles for community institutions, and knowledge about strategies for progress.
- They helped develop more-capable leaders and a broader and deeper pool of homegrown potential leaders.

Create opportunity itself...

- RCCI teams were effective in strengthening the foundation for economic development in their communities and in implementing economic development strategies.
- They assisted in creating opportunities for people to stay in their community instead of migrating out by: supporting and increasing entrepreneurship; nurturing small business development; providing leadership to identify and develop new economic opportunities; and educating and/or retraining dislocated workers.
- They increased educational access, reaching and serving previously underserved populations and better serving at-risk students.

The RCCI demonstration showed how rural community colleges can lead successful community-change efforts, moving their communities and people toward greater prosperity. The 24 colleges provided much-needed leadership in equipping people for productive, rewarding work and increasing their communities' capacities to provide that work. The dedication and hard work of each team has defined a road to progress that other rural community colleges and economically distressed communities can follow.

In 2002, RCCI transitioned into a new four-year phase aimed at institutionalizing the Initiative and spreading it to more communities. Two Regional Rural Development Centers, one at Iowa State University and the other at Mississippi State University, will provide a permanent home with public funding streams to ensure the Initiative's long-term sustainability. They will provide training and capacity-building activities and will expand the number of colleges adopting RCCI philosophy and practices.

The Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) is another outgrowth of RCCI's demonstration phase. RCCI college presidents created the RCCA as a mechanism for sustaining and expanding the RCCI learning network; it is a nonprofit association, and membership is open to all rural community and tribal colleges.

For more information about RCCI's current phase, contact Mary Emery at the Heartland Center (402-474-7667 or memery@heartlandcenter.info) or Alan Barefield at Southern Rural Development Center (662-325-3207 or alanb@srdc.msstate.edu).

More information about the Rural Community College Alliance is available at www.ruralcommunitycolleges.org.

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RESOURCES

Resources Available from the RCCI

(The RCCI web site, http://www.mdcinc.org/rcci, includes many resources developed during the demonstration program. Some of these publications are available for download from the web site.)

Strategies for Rural Development and Increased Access to Education: A Toolkit for Rural Community Colleges. This package, which includes 11 videos, three guidebooks, and a notebook of resources, serves as a toolkit for rural communities and community colleges. Step-by-step strategic planning and team-building processes for developing the regional economy and increasing access to education are provided along with profiles of effective practices from many rural communities. Video titles are: *RCCI Philosophy — Community Colleges as Catalysts for Rural Development, Moving from Vision to Action, Building Effective Teams, Developing the Regional Economy, Supporting Small Business and Entrepreneurship, Developing the Workforce, Developing Telecommunications and Distance Learning, Improving Access to Education,* and *Harnessing the Power of Local Culture.* A detailed description of the toolkit is available online, as is the toolkit introduction, which contains an in-depth description of the RCCI, the toolkit, and suggestions for use; see www.mdcinc.org/rcci. A printed prospectus is available by mail free of charge. 1998.

RCCI: Planting the Seeds of Change. This package includes two videos and companion guidebooks. The first set, *Planting the Seeds of Change*, describes the central principles of the RCCI and the resulting collaborative process and change efforts at Meridian Community College (MS) and Sitting Bull College (ND). Viewers watch how change happened over time in these two very different RCCI communities. Those considering undertaking a community development initiative will gain an understanding of the complex nature of this work and the personal commitment in entails. The second set, *Leadership for Change*, emphasizes the multiple levels of competencies community leaders need to undertake effective community-change efforts. It also explores the methods and strategies of the RCCI as a structure for addressing those multiple-level needs. December 2002.

Community Colleges and Rural Development: Strategies for Funders. This package informs foundations and public agencies concerned with rural development about lessons from the RCCI experience. The paper highlights the potential for rural colleges to serve as catalysts for community renewal and offers insights about designing and managing effective rural development initiatives. The accompanying video features interviews with rural development experts speaking about community colleges as catalysts for change. October 2002.

Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative. This paper describes the vision and core concepts of the RCCI. MDC has revised the conceptual framework three times since 1995, each time incorporating new concepts and ideas learned from research and from the RCCI experience. The final edition reflects seven years of experimentation and learning. 2001.

Toward Rural Prosperity: A State Policy Framework in Support of Rural Community Colleges. This paper offers a framework to help community college advocates assess the alignment of state policies with the RCCI philosophy and mission. It discusses models for state support of community and economic development, educational access, workforce development, and technology; and it assesses how alternative funding and governance systems affect rural community colleges' capacity to serve their communities. The paper was written for the RCCI by J. Parker Chesson, Jr., and Sarah Rubin. November 2002.

Preserving Access with Excellence: Financing for Rural Community Colleges. This paper analyzes the effect of community college funding trends on rural community colleges and their students. It makes the case for increased state and federal investment to expand the capacity of these institutions and expand access to education for low-income students. This paper was written for the RCCI by King Alexander, Stephen G. Katsinas, and Ronald D. Opp. January 2003.

Title III: A Critically Important Federal Initiative Supporting Rural Community Colleges. This is a policy paper written to initiate a dialogue on increasing Title III funding in preparation for upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. It was written for the RCCI by Stephen G. Katsinas and Ronald D. Opp. 2001.

Other Resources from MDC

Building Community by Design. For nearly 15 years, MDC has been experimenting with the pragmatic side of overcoming the vast challenges communities face by helping local leaders and organizations find the levers of innovation and change. This new guidebook codifies our approach and experience. Our work can be described as community-building, leadership development, building social capital, institutional and community change, or capacity-building. We draw on all these traditions, and we share with their proponents a belief that motivated people in trusting relationships are the lifeblood of community, whether that community exists at the scale of a school, a neighborhood, a county, or a state. Our experience has convinced us that society has many of the tools we need for constructing vigorous, generative, and visionary communities of problem-solvers, for building pools of principled, broad-thinking leaders who can replenish our increasingly burdened stocks of social capital. This guidebook is organized around those approaches, and with each, we share the methods that have worked for us and for our partner organizations. With more than 350 pages of tools, references, and examples, the guidebook is a rich resource for community-change practitioners and leaders. September 2002.

The Building Blocks of Community Development. MDC has drawn upon its 36 years of development work in Southern communities to create a new resource to assist state and local leaders in improving the standard of living for all Southerners. *The Building Blocks of Community Development* provides a comprehensive new paradigm for understanding economic development, the sustainability of which is dependent on comprehensive community development. This paper, developed by a team with more than 76 collective years of development experience, lays out a framework of related issues that together form the six, interrelated building blocks to economic prosperity and community well-being. MDC's history as one of the South's leading development non-profits with experience in economic and demographic research, direct community assistance, and public policy development makes us uniquely qualified in the community development arena. May 2002.

For more information about any of these resources, please see the MDC web site at http://www.mdcinc.org or contact MDC Inc., P.O. Box 17268, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-7268; (919) 968-4531or e-mail lmckinnie@mdcinc.org.

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